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Warriors without a war

Michael Organ

University of Wollongong, morgan@uow.edu.au

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Warriors without a war

Abstract

Opposition to the naming by the Western Australian Barnett government of a prominent Perth city square after Noongar resistance warrior Yagan highlights the failure to recognise the Aboriginal War of 1788–1901. Whilst many view the place naming as an honour, others see it as an insult to a man murdered in 1833 for opposing the brutality and dispossession of European settlement. Yagan was a warrior at war. At the time of his capture in 1832 local settler Robert Lyon argued for his treatment as a prisoner of war. 'What war?' you may ask. There is no Aboriginal War officially recognised or commemorated by the Australian nation, or by the institution tasked with that duty, the Australian War Memorial.

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Warriors Without a War

Michael Organ

‘... the then unsettled ... Great South Land.’ (Tony Abbott, 2014)

Opposition to the naming by the Western Australian Barnett government of a prominent Perth city square after Noongar resistance warrior Yagan highlights the failure to recognise the Aboriginal War of 1788–1901. Whilst many view the place naming as an honour, others see it as an insult to a man murdered in 1833 for opposing the brutality and dispossession of European settlement. Yagan was a warrior at war. At the time of his capture in 1832 local settler Robert Lyon argued for his treatment as a prisoner of war. ‘What war?’ you may ask. There is no Aboriginal War officially recognised or commemorated by the Australian nation, or by the institution tasked with that duty, the Australian War Memorial. This omission of an inconvenient truth has been highlighted in recent years by the Aboriginal community, academics and military historians, and sections of the wider community, with calls for redress increasing in the lead-up to the Anzac centenary celebrations.

The scene was set for the conflict to come with the first words spoken by Aborigines to Europeans at Botany Bay on 28 April 1770, when Captain James Cook and his party attempted to land—‘*Wirra, Wirra, wai*’ (Go away!). Cook responded to spears and stones with musket fire. In 1788 Governor Arthur Phillip and his military regiments occupied what was declared to be *terra nullius* (‘land belonging to no one’). As they sailed into what became Sydney Harbour on 23 January the shore was lined with people shouting “*Wirra, Wirra!*” The invasion began with the Crown providing no recognition of Indigenous law, language or custom by way of treaty or reparation.

The invasion was an act of war, though there would never be a formal declaration, as this would have been tantamount to the Crown declaring war upon itself. To argue that there was no war because none was officially declared is a moot point: war without formal declaration was then the norm, as Maurice revealed in his classic 1883 study *Hostilities Without Declaration of War*. In Europe and the United States between 1700 and 1870 war was officially declared only ten times and waged 107 times without declaration. During the nineteenth century Great Britain declared war once—during 1854, against Russia.

On 3 March 1816 Governor Lachlan Macquarie, supreme representative of the Crown in the Australian colonies, declared war on the Aboriginal people of New South Wales. His public proclamation and corresponding secret orders to the military regiments under his command instigated a campaign whereby all Aboriginal people encountered were to be captured as ‘prisoners of war’. The regiments were ordered to pursue and fire upon any who attempted to escape. Men shot and killed in such encounters were to be hung from trees in prominent positions to strike terror into the surviving Aboriginal population. Camps were created to house those captured, prisoners were transported to penal establishments such as Port Arthur, and children were taken from families and tribes for re-education. The campaign—or ‘service’, as Macquarie called it—was executed with ‘secrecy and despatch’. Gatherings of six or more Aborigines were declared illegal, customary practice was outlawed, and the civilian population was granted permission to shoot and kill those Aboriginal people who did not adhere to the tenets of the proclamation.

The bodies of slain warriors were decapitated and their heads sent off to museums in Europe. On 1 November 1816 Governor Macquarie declared an end to the war and reported to British authorities on the success of the campaign, though omitting its more barbaric elements, including the massacre at Appin on 17 April 1816 of a group comprising fifteen men, women and children, carried out by a military regiment under cover of darkness.

War is war, and this was one, plain and simple. In 2014 the undeclared war remains an open wound for Indigenous people, who continue to fight for rights, freedoms and justice. The occupiers fight back as they have since 1770: with overwhelming force and resources. The Australian War Memorial refuses to accept the facts of history and commemorate the valour of those Aboriginal warriors who fought with bravery against the invaders. The terms of the *Australian War Memorial Act* 1980 clearly allow for the inclusion of war-like actions within Australia during the colonial period. The Australian War Memorial's current view is that Aboriginal history, like those expatriated skulls, belongs in a museum—the National Museum of Australia, in fact.

The Anzac landings at Gallipoli in April 1915 are commemorated at the national level as this country's first 'rite of passage'. The Australian War is ignored. Why is this so? Is it because 'we' were the enemy? That we carried out the atrocities? That we have blood on our hands? The obvious answer is yes. Nothing else can account for our behaviour as a nation. The Australian War Memorial symbolically leads the country in denial, backed by the RSL and government. The media supports this omission or largely ignores the issue. The Indigenous population observe Anzac Day and wonder why their own experiences of war are ignored. They receive no answer. Memorials are erected to Indigenous members of Australian military forces, but the Aboriginal War remains unmemorialised.

It is time for Australia to honour the deeds and heroism of this country's first war veterans: the Indigenous men, women and children who fought in the Australian War from 1770. They fought with honour. They fought for the Dreaming, and family. They fought for country. They fought valiantly and they died courageously. The sacrifice should not be forgotten. And first, it must be remembered.